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U.S. - VIETNAM NORMALIZATION..".Too Much Too Soon or Too Little Too  
Late"

Core Course IV

LTC Jim Woodbridge, USA / Class of 1994  
The Geostrategic Context  
Dr. Howard J. Wlarda, FSL  
COL Charles J. Schwartzman, Faculty Adv

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President Clinton ordered an end to the U.S. trade embargo against Vietnam on February 3, 1994. The action was taken after high-level U.S. interaction with Vietnam during the past year, reportedly achieving "*tangible results*" in resolving POW/MIA cases, and a January 27, 1994 vote in the U.S. Senate urging the embargo be lifted. However, the debate over U.S.-Vietnam normalization continues. There are those who believe we are not moving quickly enough toward complete normalization to the extent that we should already be exchanging Ambassadors. Others argue that lifting the trade embargo is too much because by doing so the U.S. loses its leverage on negotiations over POW/MIA cases.

In answering the U.S. - Vietnam normalization question we need to review U.S. interests and the projected impact of increased versus decreased normalization on these interests. The generally agreed-on U.S. interests with Vietnam are: economics (American business); POW/MIA resolution; Human Rights (humanitarian concerns); and stability among the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). (2, 39-41)

## ECONOMICS

Disintegration of the Soviet Union along with East European communist countries and the economic successes in several ASEAN countries during the past five years have caused Vietnam, along with the U.S. and other western countries, to reassess economic policies and opportunities.

The Soviet Union accounted for approximately 80 percent of Vietnam's trade

with communist countries and over 60 percent of its total foreign trade from 1975 to 1990. (3, 47) Vietnam received its final aid from Moscow in 1991 of about \$1 billion. It appears the fall of the Soviet empire has actually benefited Vietnam. Its economy grew 8.3 percent in 1992, up from 4.7 percent in 1991. Annual inflation has decreased from 680 percent in 1986 to 18 percent in 1992. Vietnam's currency has stabilized and its trade deficit nearly disappeared in 1992. (1, 69)

Hanoi began inviting investment in Vietnam with its 1988 Foreign Investment Law. This law offered 100 percent foreign ownership of joint ventures, low tax rates, guarantees against expropriation and many other incentives. Hanoi reported approval of over \$3 billion in foreign investments. France led an effort to provide bridge loans to pay off Vietnam's delinquent debt to the IMF and World Bank. Italy committed \$140 million over a three year period; Australia \$76 million of assistance over four years; and Japan pledged \$390 million to pay off the Japanese portion of Vietnam's arrears on convertible-currency debt. (2, 52) (1, 69)

With the rapid trend toward increasing trade and investment in Vietnam, it was obvious American companies would be concerned about missing possible opportunities. The lifting of the U.S. trade embargo will now allow American businesses to compete. The grander objective to be achieved through economic investment will be to reduce the economic imperative behind Vietnam's communist system and thereby result in eventual political relaxation and

liberalization in Vietnam. (4, 8) The POW/MIA issue may ultimately benefit from economic success in Vietnam.

## POW/MIA ISSUE

Resolving the fate of POWs and MIAs continues to be the most emotional and volatile issue surrounding U.S.-Vietnam relations. Every president since Richard Nixon has been faced with the issue. President Carter sent Congressman Sonny Montgomery to Vietnam in 1977 to discuss the MIA issue with Vietnamese officials. Congressman Montgomery returned with eleven bodies. (8, 200) Richard C. Holbrooke, Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs during the Carter Administration, made the following statement before the Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs on the House Committee for International Relations on July 27, 1977: *"We said we were prepared to end our trade embargo contingent on the opening of an American Embassy in Hanoi and that we were prepared to agree to Vietnam's membership in the United Nations. We also made it clear that progress in our relations was based on the assumption of continuing efforts on MIA accounting and return of remains."* (9, 359)

The Vietnamese never fully cooperated with the Carter Administration on POW/MIA issues and abruptly stopped any chance of normalization during Carter's term with their invasion of Cambodia on 25 December 1978.

In July 1983 Mr. Paul D. Wolfowitz was serving as President Reagan's Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs when he briefed the same subcommittee as Mr. Holbrooke had six years earlier on the same issue of

POW/MIA. In his statement, Mr. Wolfowitz stressed the U.S. would not consider normalization with Vietnam as long as it occupied Cambodia. He stated the POW/MIA issue was viewed by the U.S. as the most important bilateral issue between the U.S. and Vietnam. In closing, Mr. Wolfowitz said the Vietnamese Government had been unwilling to cooperate fully on the POW/MIA issue. (9, 55-57)

Six years later the U.S. still had not normalized relations with Vietnam, although Vietnam had started a positive shift toward withdrawing from Cambodia and had cooperated further on the POW/MIA issue. In 1989 President Bush's Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs was Richard H. Solomon. In a major policy speech in September 1989, Mr. Solomon brought out several recurring themes reference U.S.-Vietnam normalization. He stated Hanoi's occupation of Cambodia was the principle obstacle to normalization, that establishment of diplomatic relations could only occur after a complete withdrawal. Mr. Solomon went on to say, "... *this Administration and the last have deemed of the highest priority: achieving the most complete accounting possible of our servicemen missing in Indochina.*" Thus, Mr. Solomon's stated U.S. policy theme toward Vietnam was basically the same as the past four administrations, both Democratic and Republican. (11, 48-49)

Based on Vietnamese cooperation on Cambodia and the successful completion of elections there in May 1993, the slow and narrow "pace and scope" of U.S. normalization with Vietnam truly depends on the POW/MIA issue. (4, 3)

Since General John Vessey led a U.S. Presidential delegation to Hanoi in 1987, Vietnam has returned hundreds of sets of remains said to be those of U.S. MIAs. Only a small percentage were confirmed as American MIAs. (4, 2) U.S. success on the POW/MIA issue has improved with Vietnam's realization that without the Soviet Union, it needs economic assistance from the U.S. and Western countries. A breakdown of 345 MIAs accounted for since the end of the war supports this:

- 1974-75 post war years-28
- 1976-78 U.S./Vietnam normalization negotiations -47
- 1979-81 U.S./Vietnam talks break down-4
- 1982-84 first Reagan Administration-20
- 1985-88 second Reagan Administration-145
- 1989-92 Bush Administration-96
- 1993 Clinton Administration-5 (Z, 4)

Several actions have taken place since 1991 that support removing the POW/MIA issue as a road block to normalization. In 1991 Vietnam agreed to a U.S. office in Hanoi for POW/MIA Affairs; Joint Task Force-Full Accounting (JTF-FA) was established in 1992; Assistant Secretary of State Solomon held two days of talks in Hanoi, May 1992; General Vessey and other U.S. officials visited Hanoi in October 1992 and received a pledge from Vietnam to grant greater access to POW/MIA data; a senior-level Clinton Administration delegation held three days of discussion on POW/MIAs in Hanoi, July 1993; seven U.S. Senators led by Senator Johnston visited Vietnam for three days, January 1994; and Admiral Charles

Larson, CINCPAC visited Vietnam and returned January of this year. (4, 10-11)

The POW/MIA issue comes down to what appears to be irreconcilable differences on what the outcome of normalization will produce. Those favoring normalization are convinced increased access will allow resolution. The parties opposed firmly believe normalization will make the Vietnamese more intransigent, expecting Hanoi to stress, for example, past demands for U.S. reconstruction aid as a further precondition for a full accounting on POW/MIAs.

The emotional aspect comes out in the "National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia" news release of January 27, 1994. The article accuses CINPAC Admiral Larson and Major General Thomas Needham, U.S. Army JTF-FA Commander, of "disgraceful conduct " because they both support the lifting of the trade embargo and do not believe the Vietnamese are withholding critical information. Both Admiral Larson and General Needham served distinguished tours in the Vietnam War. It is difficult to question their credibility.

#### HUMAN RIGHTS/HUMANITARIAN NEEDS

At approximately \$200 Vietnam has one of the lowest per capita incomes in the world. (5, 168) Human rights abuses increased significantly in 1990 when Vietnam embarked on a campaign of repression out of fear of the events occurring in Eastern Europe. It was designed to intimidate and punish any Vietnamese citizen who challenged the political authority of the communist party in any way. Included in the clampdown was the forcible suppression in Saigon of



demonstrators against the collapse of credit unions and of veterans protesting government neglect. (2, 55)

Within days of President Clinton's lifting of the trade embargo, Clinton received a letter from a group of ten senators urging the Administration to be *"more vigilant"* in pressing Hanoi for human rights improvements and to seek *"the release of all nonviolent political and religious dissidents"* as well as reforms in Vietnam's legal system. The letter went on to say, *"The U.S. cannot exempt Vietnam from scrutiny and criticism for not meeting internationally recognized human rights norms..."* A retired Vietnamese general and unofficial spokesman, Tran Cong Man, said while Vietnam was ready to discuss human rights issues, *"There must be no pressure. It's just a consultation. Vietnam is now in a state of stability... we must not jeopardize."* (6, A29)

The victims of the human rights debate are often the people we are trying to help. Holding back economic aid based on lack of progress in human rights may deny thousands of impoverished Vietnamese their basic right to shelter and food. The Vietnamese people have suffered since communist "liberation". By the late 1980's the physical and psychological scars of war, poverty, and repression could be found throughout Vietnam. Basic foods were scarce or nonexistent; unemployment was in excess of 20 percent; and malnutrition was widespread, especially among children. (2, 56)

The Vietnamese government had come to realize many of its problems were caused by economic isolation and the failure of implementing socialist doctrine.

its freeing of the private sector, subject to local party controls, has resulted in numerous small enterprises. These enterprises provide productive jobs for thousands of Vietnamese and are making available basic commodities, including food, necessary for the most basic of all human rights, food for life itself. (2, 57)

## **STABILITY**

Southeast Asia has entered a period that may well be its most stable in recent history, from a security point of view. Vietnam has been forced to become a non-aggressive neighbor since it no longer has any strong allies with the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The U.S.'s close work with ASEAN and Western countries forced Hanoi to experience the severe economic and diplomatic consequences of its policy in Cambodia.

Stability for the Southeast Asian community clearly falls into economic security. The ASEAN countries have become a showcase of successful economic development with economic growth rates as high as 10 percent per year over the last few years. (5, 17)

Our primary security obligation in Southeast Asia is to Thailand and the Philippines to which we are legally bound by the Manila Pact of 1954. Currently, there are no looming strategic threats from any superpowers.

## **NORMALIZATION ...More or Less**

The centerpiece of the U.S.-Vietnam normalization question is: Will we benefit as a country by continuing toward full normalization with Vietnam? The answer is a resounding yes!

As normalization incrementally grows toward full normalization, the U.S. policy will have to balance the critical aspects of the POW/MIA issue and human rights. A clearly articulated plan for resolving these two issues must be formulated in a format that everyone understands; meaning both the executive and legislative branches of our government along with the American public.

Congress had the right answer toward Vietnam in Section 607 of the Foreign Relations Authorization Act back in Fiscal Year 1979 when it stated, *"The Congress finds that the conduct of diplomatic relations with a foreign government has as its principal purpose the discussion and negotiation with that government of outstanding issues and, like the recognition of a foreign government, does not in itself imply approval of that government or of the political-economic system it represents."* (12, 43)

As American presence in Vietnam grows through increased U.S. business activities and diplomatic exchanges, our access to information on POW/MIAs will expand. It is time to believe our distinguished veterans such as General Vessey, Admiral Larson, and General Needham, who truly understand the emotional pain associated with POW/MIA personnel and support their recommendation that increased normalization will help to further resolve the POW/MIA issue.

Opening economic trade will immediately begin to improve the people of Vietnam's fundamental human right to basic commodities and food supplies. Once humanitarian needs begin to be satisfied and economic reforms expand, the U.S.

can start the delicate process of gradually pushing the Vietnamese government on human rights.

It is long past time for the U.S. to declare victory with Vietnam and lay out a two year glide path for full normalization.

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